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New Alzheimer's vaccine to be tested on people soon

Early experiments on mice halted condition; considered safe for humans

July 23, 2001

BY SETH BORENSTEIN

FREE PRESS WASHINGTON STAFF

WASHINGTON -- Tests on humans will begin this fall to see if a new vaccine can stop and even reverse the effects of Alzheimer's disease.

The tests involving 375 people in the United States and Europe will determine if the vaccine is effective in combatting the premature senility and memory loss caused by Alzheimer's, a degenerative disease of the central nervous system. The vaccine, called AN1792, has already proven safe for humans and somewhat successful in mice.

The vaccine, developed by Elan Corp. of Ireland along with Wyeth-Ayerst Laboratories of New Jersey, has progressed through testing at "rocket speed," said Bill Thies, vice president of medical and scientific affairs for the Alzheimer's Association.

"This is very encouraging, and we'll wait with bated breaths to see what the results of the clinical studies are," said Marcelle Morrison-Bogorad, neurosciences director at the U.S. National Institute on Aging in Bethesda, Md.

Morrison-Bogorad said it's "one of the most advanced, and it's one of the most unexpected" treatments.

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Exhibit H

The vaccine tries to get the body's immune system to produce antibodies to the brain plaque, called beta amyloid, that is seen in large amounts in Alzheimer's patients. Researchers aren't sure if the plaque is the cause or result of Alzheimer's.

The vaccine, injected in the arm, contains an enzyme from brain plaque intended to stimulate the person's immune system. The vaccine should "stimulate scavenger cells to go up and clean up what's in the brain," said Dale Schenk, Elan senior vice president of discovery research.

Schenk surprised the Alzheimer's research community in June 1999 when he announced that the vaccine worked to stop and even somewhat reverse the disease in mice. These mice were observed to perform better on memory tests.

The idea of injecting brain plaque into Alzheimer's patients was not considered by most researchers at the time, Morrison-Bogorad said.

"It's about as good as you can hope for in the mice," Schenk said. "Now, of course we've got to see if this translates into humans."

The vaccine will be given several times in various doses to people with mild to moderate Alzheimer's. The study will last two years but early indications on individual patients could come six months after the first batch of vaccinations, he said.

Schenk would not reveal where in the United States the testing would be done, saying individual research centers will decide whether to go public because they could be deluged with Alzheimer's patients.

For the past two years, researchers have tested 100 Alzheimer's patients with the vaccine only to see if it was safe. They determined the vaccine is safe, but the number of test patients was too small to determine whether it successfully battled the disease.

Down the road, if all goes well, the vaccine could even be used as a preventive measure.

Even if the vaccine works in removing brain plaque but not in improving human memory, it helps researchers, Thies said. That's because about half of Alzheimer's research is concentrating on brain plaque, and if that proves not to be the cause, doctors can refocus their efforts.

About 4 million people in the United States, including former President Ronald Reagan, have Alzheimer's. With the aging population, 14 million people will have the disease in the year 2050, Morrison-Bogorad said.

The vaccine has not yet been approved by the Food and Drug Administration.

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